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ABSTRACT

This document is designed to teach students about foreign public opinion and its impact on U.S. foreign policy. As information and communication exchange among nations proliferates, it is important for citizens to understand foreign societies and for U.S. policies to be understood and accepted by other nations. The purpose of this document is to explain the role of the United States Information Agency, and to teach the importance of broadening dialogue between the people of the United States and their institutions and counterparts abroad. The document provides concepts to be learned, definitions of key terms, questions for classroom discussion, classroom activities, and background materials. (RJC)

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United States Information Agency

Washington, D.C. 20547

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# The United States Information Agency

## THE IMPORTANCE OF FOREIGN PUBLIC OPINION FOR AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY: GUIDELINES FOR TEACHERS

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EDWARD HINKER



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## I. CONCEPTS TO BE LEARNED

**1. American citizens are inescapably influenced by events throughout the world**, particularly as new media of worldwide information and communication explode, and are becoming more aware of and enmeshed in the affairs of other societies. U.S. policy makers must be sensitive to the concerns and interests of their countrymen, in domestic and foreign affairs alike, in order to build broad support even for policies that clearly serve the public interest. To make informed decisions concerning U.S. policies, **Americans must understand foreign societies**, perspectives, histories, cultures.

**2. Foreign public opinion** of the United States **is also important**. It can affect greatly the success or failure of American foreign policy in a given country, as well as official and unofficial relations with that country. **Thomas Jefferson** stated in the Declaration of Independence that the United States owes "a decent respect to the opinion of mankind."

**3.** During World Wars I and II, American policy makers initiated several information programs to counter enemy propaganda and to clarify American wartime efforts and positions. In 1953, President Eisenhower created the independent U.S. Information Agency [called the U.S. Information Service (USIS) overseas] to streamline U.S. Government overseas information programs and make them more effective. Much has changed since its beginnings, but **USIA's core purposes** remain constant:

- o to **provide information about the U.S., its people, values and institutions;**
- o to **explain and advocate U.S. policies** in terms that are credible and meaningful in foreign cultures;
- o to build lasting relationships and mutual understanding through the **exchange of people and ideas**; and
- o to **advise U.S. Government decision makers on foreign attitudes** and their implications for U.S. policies.

4. It is the **mission of the United States Information Agency** to understand, inform and influence foreign publics in promotion of the national interest; and to broaden the dialogue between Americans, their institutions and counterparts abroad. This is called **public diplomacy**, which, unlike much traditional diplomacy is almost always, by definition, **an open process**. Publicity is inherent in its purpose, the appeal being to the public overseas, enabling them to know and better understand American policies and culture.

5. There is a **fundamental difference between** a country's legitimate information programs, known as **public diplomacy, and** what is commonly understood as **propaganda**, i.e. purposely false, distorted, or incomplete information. Note, however, that the basic meaning of the word propaganda is simply the purposeful use of information, i.e. it can be either positive or negative in nature.

6. The **"country team"** of American officials under the leadership of the Ambassador no longer merely interprets the host country to the Department of State but also expends much effort to **interpret the United States to the host country**. The Ambassador and his/her team represent both traditional (government-to-government) diplomacy and public diplomacy, tailored to country-specific issues, which can include respect for human rights, free speech, and the virtues of a market economy, ecological sanity, etc.

## II. DEFINITIONS

**PUBLIC DIPLOMACY:**

"A government's process of communicating with foreign publics in an attempt to bring about understanding for its nation's ideas and ideals, its institutions and culture as well as its national goals and current policies."

Hans N. Tuch: Communicating With the World; St. Martin's Press, N.Y, N.Y. 1990

Official government efforts to shape the communications environment overseas in which American foreign policy is played out, in order to reduce the degree to which misperceptions and misunderstandings complicate relations between the U.S. and other nations.

**TRADITIONAL DIPLOMACY:**

Relations between one country and another on a government-to-government basis, often involving formal negotiations of treaties and other agreements between nations. This kind of diplomacy often implies relations between two people or groups of equal or similar rank in the diplomatic community, an ambassador with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, for example.

**PROPAGANDA:**

Propaganda is ideas, information, or other material disseminated to win people over to a given doctrine. Propaganda is persuading public opinion in favor of; disinformation, persuading public opinion against. Propaganda can be based on fact; disinformation is always based on falsehoods and untruths.

**MISINFORMATION:**

Misinformation is simply unintentional errors that occur when facts are unclear and deadline pressures urgent. Misinformation is quickly corrected; the source of the misinformation quickly retracts any inaccurate statements made, or, once the inaccurate information is refuted, it is not repeated.

**DISINFORMATION:**

Disinformation is the deliberate spreading of falsehoods by a government for a political purpose. It is a cheap, crude and often very effective way to inflame public opinions and affect attitudes. Further, disinformation is predictable and can be tracked according to variations on a limited number of themes.

**COUNTRY TEAM:**

The United States Ambassador and, under his/her direction, representatives of all official agencies working to further American interests in a given country. These agencies may include, among others, the Department of State, the U.S. Information Agency, the Department of Commerce, and the Agency for International Development.

**FOREIGN POLICY:**

The policy of a sovereign state in its interaction with other sovereign states. As various issues in our relations with other countries are addressed by American policy makers, such as our concern for human rights abuses in China, a formal policy (or established official position) is arrived at.

The U.S. Executive Branch, in consultation with the Congress, develops various formal foreign policies to address issues that arise between the U.S. and foreign countries. The American domestic process is inherently contentious and frequently requires compromise among sometimes conflicting U.S. national interests.

## III. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Who are we as Americans? How do we want others to see us? Is it true to say that perception **IS** reality?

2. Does it matter whether the people of other countries like us? How does it affect the way Americans are treated overseas? Should a government agency be mandated to address this issue and work toward better understanding of the U.S. overseas?

3. Many of us have stereotypes of people of other countries. What stereotypes do people of other countries have of Americans? (E.g., generous, independent, violent, gun-crazy, sports-minded, super-hygienic.) Where do these stereotypes come from? (E.g., American films, pop artists, media coverage of American events, brief stays in the U.S., Americans traveling overseas.)

4. What do foreign students learn of the U.S. during an exchange visit to the U.S.? Do exchanges really promote better relations with other countries?

5. What kind of background and education would best prepare someone for a career in the foreign service, particularly as a USIS officer? (E.g., generalist with a liberal arts education, an intense interest in world affairs, and a fascination with other cultures and peoples.)

6. Discuss some issues that are not country-specific, but rather, have consequences for the entire world. (E.g. environmental problems, population control, controlling nuclear proliferation)

7. Discuss the multitude of means of communicating information to foreign citizens about the U.S. (E.g., TV, radio, books, magazines, speakers, face-to-face, movies, exchanges). All of these are used by USIA officers in their work overseas. Which are the most efficient? The most immediate? The most persuasive? Which are the most difficult to control or respond to effectively?

8. How can we know what foreign citizens are thinking about the various issues we consider important? (E.g., public opinion polling, track and report key points covered in all foreign media, listen to key opinion leaders in the host country, meet with students and other key young people.)

9. Should the government bring to the U.S. on exchange visits even those people most negative about American policies and culture? (Some Americans feel that we shouldn't reward such people with a free trip to the U.S. Others argue that these are just the kind of people we should expose to American society close-up; the overall effect of an American visit will be positive, they feel.)

10. Is there a danger that if the federal government is involved in international exchanges this could lead to government control of who may participate? Are private sector organizations better suited to carry them out? (In effect, the current system involves very close cooperation between the federal government and private sector organizations. USIA provides, for example, grants to private organizations who do the kind of work USIA promotes, such as exchanges of students and performing arts groups. In many cases, USIA provides guidelines to ensure that projects are most effectively carried out by pertinent private sector organizations.)

11. Discuss some of the things we take for granted in an advanced democratic society that do not exist (or are not yet commonplace) in many emerging democracies (E.g., commercial television programs, advertising in general, checking accounts, credit cards, a free press, freedom of expression.)

## IV. CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. A small group of students **role-play foreign citizens** discussing national affairs of their country, the newly independent state of the former Soviet Union, Ukraine, which is about to welcome a group of American economic advisors.

Introduce one student playing a Ukrainian official who dislikes Americans and claims they are coming only to sell American goods to Ukrainians, not to help Ukraine develop a strong market economy. He/she also claims that Americans are racists generally, dislike all foreigners, and want Ukraine to bow to Russian dominance in the region.

Another student plays a USIS officer who argues that the U.S. is here to promote America **and** Ukraine economic cooperation for the benefit of both countries, that the U.S. favors independence and democracy for Ukraine and is not racist or anti-foreigner.

> **Objective**: To show **how difficult it is to overcome negative opinions** when actively propounded by a native person in authority.

2. A student playing the American ambassador in Guatemala calls **a meeting of the American "country team,"** including students playing the Public Affairs Officer (USIS), commercial attache, the CIA station chief, and the head of the Agency for International Development. The topic to be addressed is an editorial that just appeared in the leading newspaper that accuses Americans of kidnapping local children to export body parts to rich Americans for transplant into their children.

The USIS officer knows the editor, who is generally anti-American, and also the publisher, who is not. The CIA representative has heard of plans for a demonstration against the local binational center, run jointly by Guatemalans and Americans, and fears a riot. The AID representative discusses the difficulties his/her people are having working among Guatemalans, when so many believe anti-American propaganda.

> **Objective**: To point out the **negative effect** in daily lives that **disinformation can have**; to point out that the USIA representative is the natural team member to talk with the publisher and editor and that he/she is reluctant to be accompanied by the CIA representative (USIS personnel do not want to be associated with any activity that can be interpreted as espionage); less importantly, to show that information available to the CIA is often valuable in maintaining the safety of Embassy employees.

3. Over a period of several weeks, **students scan newspapers and magazines** for stories in which foreign public opinion of America or Americans plays a role. Each would then pick out one story for explanation to the class of: a) **what role public opinion plays** in the new story; b) **how a USIS officer**, working with the country team, might have **played a role** in producing a story positive toward Americans (or should do something to neutralize a negative aspect of the story).

4. Have a **foreign exchange student discuss** with the class what **impressions** the foreign student is getting **of American culture** and what misimpressions she/he may have had before coming to America.

5. Have students **analyze a recent popular American movie or TV show** and discuss impressions, positive or negative, that foreign citizens may get of all Americans as a result of the actions portrayed.

6. Ask an **adult** in the community with **a different ethnic background** and citizenship to **discuss incorrect impressions** Americans have of his/her country and how that person sees his/her own culture.

7. Have students **analyze newspapers for a week to determine** what percentage of the news reported is purely **American-centered as opposed to worldwide news**, i.e., that which deals entirely with foreign events and people and has no American angle (unconnected to American concerns). It is a common complaint among foreign citizens that Americans do not care what happens in the world unless it concerns American interests in some way. They claim to be citizens of the world, while they think Americans are not.

8. Have several students working as a team put together a **script for the "Voice of America" for presentation to the class,** in which not only a brief news show is presented (at the top of the hour), but also several feature stories that portray facets of U.S. society, values, etc. It might also include a musical segment. In addition, someone might write and present a VOA editorial, representing the opinion of the American government, being careful to label this as opinion, not news.

> In fact, all VOA editorials are preceded by an announcement that "we now present an editorial representing the opinion of the American government" and followed by a statement indicating that "what you just heard was an editorial representing American official opinion."

9. Write a **newspaper article** in which you **take exception to** what you see as **wrongly negative views on an American policy or action** that have been expressed in the foreign country in which you live. **Example**: a law has just been passed that will be detrimental to American interests, caused by wrong perceptions of American policy.

10. Draft a **memo from the Public Affairs Officer (USIS) to the American Ambassador** arguing in favor of a change in a policy that has a public diplomacy aspect. **Example**: Argue for cancelling plans for a U.S. battleship to stop in a harbor town where there is extreme anti-American sentiment.

11. A Japanese **exchange student has been shot dead by an American** who mistook him for a burglar (based on a recent actual occurrence in New Orleans). **Devise a public affairs strategy** to counteract the negative effect this can have in a host country.

In actual fact, the strategy included an effort to communicate to the Japanese public: 1) the general shock and outrage felt by many Americans; 2) the strong feelings many Americans have about the "right to bear arms." Also, on a subsequent visit to Japan, President Clinton called upon the parents of the victim to convey condolences.

12. Set up a **debate**, with one side arguing that the **Federal Government should support educational exchanges** and the other side arguing that the private sector can do it just as well.

The debate is current in Washington, where many consider the program of exchanges at all levels, including the Fulbright Program of senior scholar exchanges as well as high school-level programs, the best programs USIA runs. Others reason that the private sector would step in to cover the small percentage (1.5%) of Federally funded exchanges even if that grant money were not available.

13. Devise a **media strategy to prepare for a Presidential visit** to the capital of the host country. The Ambassador wants good coverage in all national and local press, as well as TV and radio coverage.

14. **Create newspaper articles or broadcast media stories** that are clear examples of propaganda (in both positive and negative senses), misinformation, and disinformation.

15. One **student role-plays an American Embassy-sponsored speaker** (in a third-world country) discussing the American system of high school curriculum, while other students play hecklers in the audience who are clearly anti-American.

The **objective** is to point up difficulties some U.S. speakers have in addressing foreign audiences. A clever, confident speaker can overcome moderate heckling and go on to make positive points with others in the audience.

16. Have several **students conduct a public opinion poll** of a representative sample **of their high school colleagues**, to determine their views of **a current American foreign policy issue**. (Example: Should fleeing Cuban citizens be allowed into the U.S. as American citizens or returned to Cuba under Castro?). They should then prepare a research report on their findings. The class can then discuss what effect this poll would have on U.S. policy, if American foreign policy makers were to be influenced by it.

17. Assign several students to do some **research** on **propaganda activities in Nazi Germany, the former Soviet Union and in today's Cuba**, as well as Iraqi disinformation activities during the Gulf War. When they report to the rest of the class, discuss whether the U.S. government should engage in similar activities to undermine the credibility of countries that oppose America.

## V. BACKGROUND MATERIALS

1. USIA 2-page fact sheet on U.S. Information Agency Purpose & Programs (including organization chart)

2. USIA Counselor's December 9, 1994, letter to all Public Affairs Officers overseas

3. Thematic brochures on Exchange Programs (blue) and Educational and Cultural Programs (green)

4. The False "Baby Parts" Rumor and Foreign Public Opinion (a summary paper by Todd Leventhal, USIA Program Officer for Countering Disinformation and Misinformation), with attachments, including a 1994 report to the United Nations: "The Child Organ Trafficking Rumor: A Modern Urban Legend," (50 pp.)

5. Leaflets on Diplomacy Building; Environment; Economics & Trade

6. USIA Director Duffey's 1/10/95 presentation to the National Performance Review

7. Speech by USIA Deputy Director Penn Kemble at the University of Pittsburgh, "Resisting the Isolationist Temptation," 9/22/93

8. Example copy of a USIA "Daily Foreign Media Reaction Report"

9. USIA Research Report of January 1995 entitled "America as Global Actor: The U.S. Image Around the World"